MADNESS IN CIVILIZATION

A Cultural History of Insanity

From the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine

'A brilliant cultural history … deserves to be widely read' THE TIMES

From the early eighteenth century onwards, it had become commonplace to see nervous illnesses of a milder sort as part of the price one paid for civilization, indeed as afflictions to which the most refined and civilized were particularly prone. A century later, these ideas began to be extended to encompass the most severe and frightening forms of Bedlam madness. Insanity, alienists and their allies argued, was a disease of civilization and of the civilized. By contrast, the condition was all-but-unknown among 'savages' and primitive peoples. Those Rousseauean Noble Savages were apparently immune to the ravages of insanity. As civilization advanced, life became more complex, more 'unnatural', faster-paced, more unsettled, more stressful, less stable. Political upheavals, of which the French and American revolutions were merely the most obvious, stirred passions and ambitions, as did the rolling economic changes of the new, market-based economic order. Ancient beliefs and status hierarchies were cast aside. Minds were disturbed by the headlong pursuit of wealth, and ambitions soared out of control. Agitation of the body politic reverberated in the bodies and minds of the citizenry. The older restraints which had kept people's appetites and expectations within bounds – church, family, lack of mobility both geographical and social, the sheer weight of tradition – were stripped away. Luxurious living and excess of every kind weakened moral and mental fibre, or so it was thought, and helped to explain the rapid rise in the number of the mad, who were most likely to be found, like their nervous counterparts, among the most ambitious, the most elevated, the most cultivated men and women of the age. It was the subject of much anxious contemporary commentary. Philippe Pinel and his favourite pupil, Esquirol, had briefly suggested that the sweeping away of the *ancien régime* might have salutary effects on the mental health of their fellow citizens. After all, that had been a social order 'ready to expire', its most privileged elements 'buried in softness and luxury'. Surely the liberty ushered in by the Revolution could not fail to have salutary effects, replacing ennui and idleness with 'vigour and energy'. But the Terror swiftly disabused them of such conceits. Pinel recast his thinking.

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